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ABSTRACT

After more than a decade of decline in the use of drugs by American high school students, national, state and local data sources seem to indicate that high school student substance abuse, particularly the use of marijuana and hallucinogens such as LSD, has been increasing for the past two years. Indicators of student substance abuse can be found in surveys and in the number of students suspended from school for violating Board of Education policies prohibiting the possession, use, or attempt to sell controlled substances, including alcohol. This Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) report summarizes local, state, and national survey data and shows the trend in suspensions related to substance abuse. Parent and school staff concerns relating to student use of alcohol and drugs were reported. WCPSS strategies to address the issue were examined as well as a call for further interventions and involvement. (JBJ)

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Is Substance Abuse Increasing Among WCPSS High School Students?

August, 1995

E&R Report No. 96E.02

Evaluation and Research Department

Wake County Public School System, Raleigh, NC

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Eye on Evaluation

Evaluation and Research Department **E&R Report No. 96E.02**
Wake County Public School System, Raleigh, NC **August, 1995**

IS SUBSTANCE ABUSE INCREASING AMONG WCPSS HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS?

Contact Person: Chuck Dulaney (850-1850)

After more than a decade of decline in the use of drugs by high school students, national, state and local data sources seem to indicate that *high school student substance abuse, particularly the use of marijuana and hallucinogens such as LSD, has been increasing for the past two years.*

Indicators of student substance abuse can be found in surveys and in the number of students suspended from school for violating Board of Education policies prohibiting the possession, use, or attempt to sell controlled substances, including alcohol. This report summarizes local, state and national survey data and shows the trend in suspensions related to substance abuse.

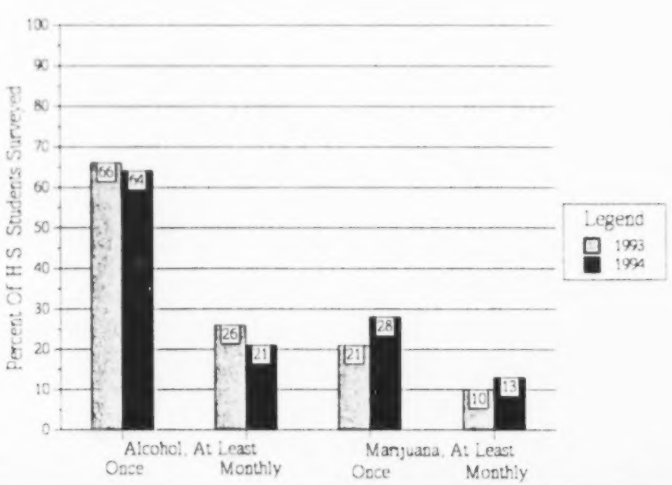
LOCAL STUDENT SURVEYS

In April 1993 and April 1994, WCPSS high school students were surveyed about their use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. Although the sample sizes and design of the two survey forms varied, similar questions allow some comparisons to be made.

As shown in Figure 1, *students reporting the use of marijuana at least once during the year increased significantly from 21% in 1993 to 28% in 1994.* Students reporting the use of alcohol showed a slight decline from 66% to 64%.

Similarly, *frequent use of marijuana (at least monthly) increased from 10% in 1993 to 13% in 1994* while frequent use of alcohol declined from 26% in 1993 to 21% in 1994.

Figure 1. WCPSS High School Students Reporting Use of Alcohol and Marijuana During the Preceding Year



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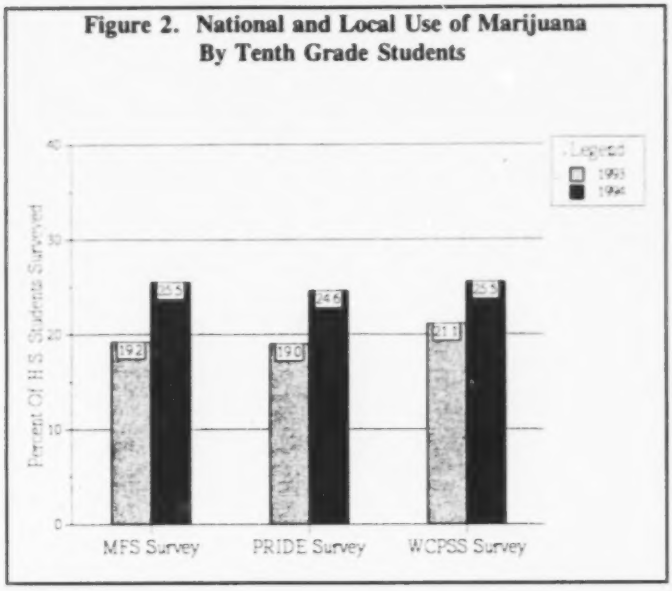
NATIONAL AND STATE SURVEYS

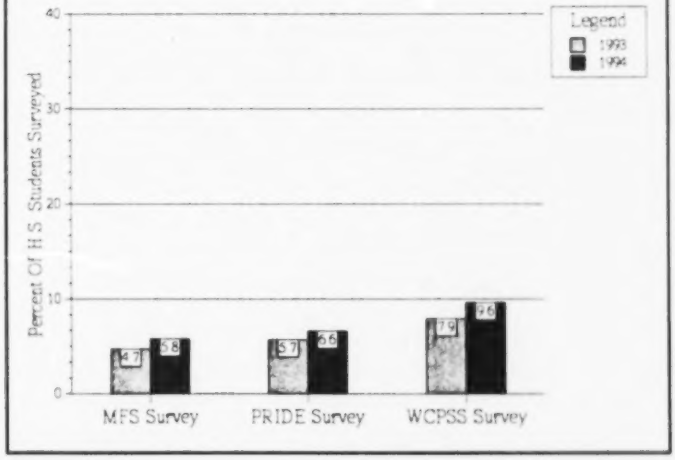
Figure 2. National and Local Use of Marijuana By Tenth Grade Students



For the second year in a row, *two national surveys also showed an increase in the percentage of high school students who indicated they had used marijuana within the preceding year.* The increasing use of marijuana by high school students was cited in preliminary results of the 1994 Monitoring the Future Survey (MFS), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and in the 1993-94 national survey conducted by PRIDE, an Atlanta-based drug abuse prevention organization. Figure 2 compares the increase from 1993 to 1994 found in the national surveys to the increase found in the WCPSS survey. As shown, *the rate of increase was similar in both the national and local surveys, and WCPSS students reported using marijuana at about the same rate as students in the national sample.*

Local and national surveys showed little or no increase in the use of cocaine, heroin or other narcotics. However, *all three surveys did show an increase in the self-reported use of hallucinogens such as LSD.* Figure 3 shows preliminary results from the national surveys compared to results in the WCPSS survey. *WCPSS students reported higher rates of hallucinogen use than the national sample.*

Figure 3. National and Local Use of LSD By Tenth Grade Students



While differences in survey methodology between years and between national and local studies make the precision of measurements questionable, the overall similarities in the size of increases and the directions of trends seem to indicate that *student use of illegal drugs such as marijuana and LSD is increasing.*

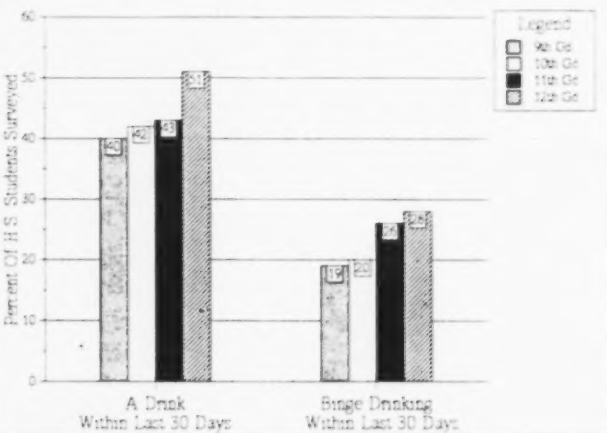
Local and national surveys did not show an increase in the percentage of students who drank alcoholic beverages. However, there was little improvement in the high rates of alcohol use indicated by students. The national survey found that 39 percent of 10th grade students had tried alcohol during the month prior to the survey. The WCPSS survey found that 21 percent of high school students reported that they drank at least monthly and 63 percent drank during the year prior to the survey.

In a 1994 report, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction reported the findings of the Spring 1993 NC Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). The YRBS collected information from a sample of 2,439 NC high school students as part of a national YRBS project sponsored by the National Centers for Disease Control.

As shown in Figure 4, the percentage of students who reported drinking during the month prior to the survey increased steadily from grade 9 to grade 12, and *almost half of the NC high school students surveyed by YRBS who drank reported that they engaged in "binge drinking."* Binge drinking was defined on the survey as having five or more alcoholic drinks within a couple of hours.

White students participating in the YRBS survey were almost twice as likely to binge drink as Black students, and males were almost twice as likely as female students to be binge drinkers.

Figure 4. High School Drinking in North Carolina



As shown in Figure 5, the following race and gender differences were also found in the 1994 WCPSS survey:

- White males drank alcohol more frequently than other groups.
- White males and females reported more frequent cigarette smoking than other groups.
- Males reported more frequent marijuana use than females.

Figure 5. Percent of WCPSS Students Reporting Daily, Weekly or Monthly Use in 1994

Substance	Black Males	Black Females	White Males	White Females	Other Males	Other Females
Alcohol	14.8	9.9	27.3	19.8	25.4	16.4
Cigarettes	9.9	8.7	24.8	24.5	23.4	17.0
Marijuana	18.2	8.2	16.3	9.4	22.6	12.1

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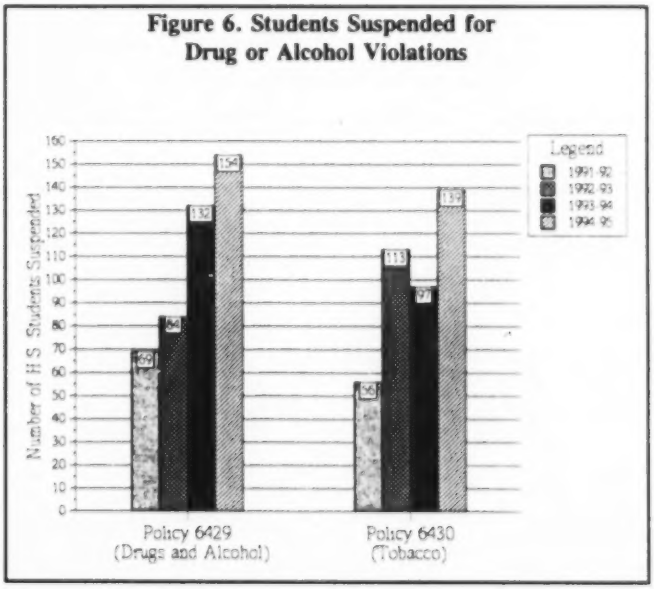
High rates of use of alcohol and cigarettes is particularly disturbing in light of the findings of a 1994 study of "gateway drugs" conducted by the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse (CASA) at Columbia University. The CASA study examined the relationship between early use of gateway drugs (defined as cigarettes, alcohol, and marijuana) and subsequent use of marijuana, cocaine and other illicit drugs as an adult. *CASA's overall finding was that the earlier an adolescent begins smoking and drinking, and the greater the frequency of smoking and drinking, the greater the likelihood that the adolescent will become a regular user of marijuana or other illicit drugs.* Specific findings included:

- Children ages 12 through 17 who had smoked cigarettes were 12 times more likely to use marijuana than children who had not smoked.
- Children who drank alcoholic beverages were 22 times more likely to use marijuana than children who did not drink.
- Adults who started drinking as children were 5 times more likely to use marijuana and 8 times more likely to use cocaine than adults who did not drink when they were children.

SUSPENSIONS FOR DRUG AND ALCOHOL VIOLATIONS

WCPSS Board of Education Policy 6429 states that "no student shall possess, use, transmit, sell, or conspire or attempt to transmit or sell, or be under the influence" of alcoholic beverages or controlled substances. The penalty for violation of this policy is long-term suspension from school. Policy 6430 bans the possession or use by students of any tobacco product on school premises, and penalties, which may include out-of-school suspension, are set at the discretion of the principal. As shown in Figure 6, *high school out-of-school suspensions for violations of policy 6429 and 6430 have risen steadily* during the past four years, except for a small decline for tobacco violations in 1993-94.

Figure 6. Students Suspended for Drug or Alcohol Violations



PARENT CONCERNS

High school parents surveyed in November 1994 were asked three questions related to student use of drugs and alcohol. Although nearly all parents agreed that their child has sufficient knowledge of the dangers of using drugs and alcohol, only half agreed that lessons at school have helped their child learn to say "no." One third of parents responding to the survey agreed that drugs and alcohol use are causing problems at their child's school. (See Figure 7.)

Figure 7. High School Parent Responses to Three WCPSS Parent Survey Items

Survey Item	Agree or Strongly Agree	Unsure	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	N
My child has sufficient knowledge of the dangers of using drugs and alcohol.	92.6%	3.6%	3.8%	5939
Drugs and alcohol use are causing behavioral problems at my child's school.	33.2%	46.5%	20.3%	5911
Lessons at school have helped my child learn to say "no" to alcohol and drugs	50.8%	29.9%	19.3%	5883

SCHOOL STAFF CONCERNS

WCPSS Staff Surveys, conducted near the end of the past three school years, have found that more than two thirds of high school teachers agreed that the use of alcohol and other drugs by students cause behavioral problems and affect academic achievement in their schools. The level of agreement was much lower in middle schools.

Figure 8. Percentage of WCPSS Teachers Who Agreed or Strongly Agreed With Survey Items Related to the Impact of Substance Abuse

Item	Middle			High		
	1993	1994	1995	1993	1994	1995
Drugs and alcohol use are causing behavior problems.	24.6%	33.1%	28.3%	81.1%	76.1%	68.4%
Drugs and alcohol use affect academic achievement.	25.6%	31.9%	31.1%	84.6%	80.6%	73.0%

Agreement among high school staff that drugs and alcohol are negatively impacting WCPSS schools seems to be decreasing at the same time that student use is increasing. The data from the student, staff and parent surveys presents a confusing picture. Do students have sufficient knowledge, as most parents seem to believe? Are behavioral problems related to drugs and alcohol really decreasing at the same time that student suspensions are increasing?

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WHAT CAN BE DONE?

While the vast majority of high school students and their parents believe that students have sufficient knowledge of the dangers of using drugs and alcohol, the 1995 staff survey showed that only 17% of middle and high school teachers, other than Health/P.E. teachers, reported teaching any lessons focusing upon prevention of student use of drugs and alcohol. If students and their parents believe that additional instruction related to substance abuse is redundant, there is little incentive for teachers to integrate such instruction into their lesson plans. The lack of any comprehensive assessment tools in this area allows belief in the adequacy of information to go unchallenged. Standardized measurements could be designed to assess student knowledge and student attitudes regarding the use of drugs and alcohol. The results of such assessments could be used to encourage more teachers to make use of curriculum materials such as the *North Carolina Interdisciplinary Curriculum for Alcohol and Other Drugs*, published in 1991 by the Department of Public Instruction.

It may be true that students have adequate information. Our society's acceptance of tobacco, alcohol, and over-the-counter drugs may create a climate in which students do not connect the information they receive with the decisions that they make. If so, prevention strategies that go beyond classroom presentation of information may be needed. Additional efforts such as dramatic presentations, the use of speakers who have quit using drugs, and support for student groups such as Students Against Drunk Driving (SADD) could be explored.

Many substance abuse specialists, such as Gary Anderson, the author of When Chemicals Come to School, recommend that schools attempt to balance prevention and instructional strategies with intervention strategies that target students with specific needs that may be academic, emotional, or social in nature. In 1994-95, WCPSS expanded one such effort when a counseling position was allotted to each high school for the purpose of implementing a Student Assistance Program (SAP) that would focus attention on the needs of individual students.

One important SAP component involved the establishment of structured counseling sessions led by the SAP Coordinator for small groups of students who were experiencing problems such as academic failure or difficulties with peer relationships. As part of the SAP evaluation at two high schools, an anonymous survey was used to collect information from students about how they believed participation in the small groups had impacted their behavior. Of the 50 students who completed survey forms after participating in SAP groups, 32% reported stopping their use of alcohol or marijuana after participating in the SAP group, and 24% reported their use of marijuana or alcohol to be less frequent after participating in the SAP group. Personal intervention seemed to make a difference for some of these students. One student wrote "I am glad I had someone to listen to me." Another student wrote "It gave me a chance to talk to people who really understand what I was going through."

While the SAP approach is promising, other strategies are needed in WCPSS to ensure that students have accurate information, and that they have the support they need for making healthy decisions. Several indicators show that student substance abuse increased during the past three years. Reversing that trend will require that educators, parents, and members of the community pay greater attention to the problem.